

***Legacies of a Movement: The Civil Rights Movement and Its Impact on the Environmental Justice Movement***

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**Abstract**

The Civil Rights movement set a precedent for non-violent protest and local activism for the many movements that have followed in its footsteps. The environmental justice movements of the 1980s drew direct inspiration from the Civil Rights movement and were able to utilize similar activism strategies using the networks and leadership that had been established during the Civil Rights era. This project analyzes the impact of the Civil Rights movement on the environmental justice movement in four key areas: environmental injustice as a matter of racism, the contributions of Civil Rights activists to the environmental justice movement of the 1980s, the political networks that were established during the Civil Rights Era that carried into the environmental justice movement, and lastly the Civil Rights protest strategies from which environmental justice activists drew inspiration. In order to establish the relationship between the Civil Rights movement and the environmental justice movement, published interviews with Civil Rights and environmental justice activists are analyzed. I analyze newspaper articles covering key environmental justice protests in order to compare the rhetoric that surrounds the political activism of underrepresented communities. Additionally, this project considers research that emerged during the transitional period from the Civil Rights movement into the environmental justice movement which explores the relationship between race and environmental injustice, such as the proximity of communities of color to hazardous waste plants, landfills, or dumps.

Ultimately, this study aims to understand how political activism can play a major role in securing the environmental rights of ethnic minority populations in the United States.

## **The Civil Rights Movement**

The Civil Rights movement was a movement against racial discrimination and segregation that began in the southern United States in the mid-1950s and carried on throughout the 1960s. Although slavery was officially abolished in 1865 after the Civil War, discrimination against Blacks in America was far from over. Jim Crow laws made segregation and discrimination against African Americans legal, which led to high racial tensions and serious violence against Black people who resisted. In order to combat these discriminatory laws and other forms of racial inequity, Black people across America started the Civil Rights movement and carried out one of the most transformative and effective protests in modern-day history. Key activists such as Martin Luther King Jr. and Rosa Parks led demonstrations that enacted policy change such as sit-in protests and freedom marches, in which an organized body of people would politically act against the issues that they saw within their societies. Although the Civil Rights movement is considered a success by many, racial discrimination persists against Black Americans in the form of environmental racism, an issue that emerged from the Civil Rights movement twenty years after its end. The Civil Rights movement contributed four main legacies to the environmental justice movement of the 1980s: the ability to recognize environment and race as directly related, the contributions of seasoned activists from the Civil Rights movement to the environmental justice movement, the grassroots networks that were established during the Civil Rights movement and returned for the environmental justice movement, and the

mobilization tactics employed during the Civil Rights movement that environmental activists modeled their own protests after.

### **The Warren County PCB Landfill Protests**

Scholars cite the beginning of the environmental justice with the Warren County Protest of 1982. Senator Jim Hunt planned to erect a landfill that would secure funding from one of his donors for his political campaign, but he failed to inform the citizens of Warren County. Not long after the landfill was built, the citizens of Warren County began to experience health complications and express other concerns regarding the landfill. Polychlorinated biphenyl is a highly toxic compound that has been linked to various types of cancers, such as liver cancer and breast cancer.<sup>1</sup>

The Warren County PCB landfill was meant to host over sixty-thousand tons of PCB-contaminated soil. In 1978, Robert Ward of the Ward PCB Transformer Company in North Carolina deliberately and secretly dumped tons of PCB-contaminated soil across the state of North Carolina, dumping a significant amount in the landfill designated for the soil in Afton, North Carolina. The PCB contaminated the surrounding natural environments, such as creeks and marshes.<sup>2</sup> When he was prosecuted, Burns was not arrested for pollution, but instead for trying to evade Environmental Protection Agency regulations which would have made disposal of the PCB-contaminated soil more expensive. Regardless, the lakes, rivers, and creeks in Warren County were permanently toxified and the waste site was deemed as a “one-time” waste site, meaning that after the incident with Burns, it would no longer operate. However, this was a

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<sup>1</sup> SAM HOWE VERHOVEK, “Racial Rift Slows Suit for ‘Environmental Justice,’” *New York Times*, 1997, sec. National Report.

<sup>2</sup> Matt Reimann, “The EPA Chose This County for a Toxic Dump Because Its Residents Were ‘Few, Black, and Poor,’” *Medium*, April 3, 2017, <https://timeline.com/warren-county-dumping-race-4d8fe8de06cb>.

lie told by the local government in order to placate the citizens, and it was later discovered that the landfill was in operation despite significant emissions of PCB from the landfill.<sup>3</sup>

The Warren County case is particularly significant because its events encapsulate the definition of environmental racism and the consequent protest against it. Benjamin F. Chavis defines environmental racism as *“the deliberate targeting of ethnic and minority communities for exposure to toxic and hazardous waste sites and facilities, coupled with the systematic exclusion of minorities in environmental policy making, enforcement, and remediation.”*<sup>4</sup> Warren County had an African American population of 60% and a low-income population of 20%. Because of its high minority population, it is very likely that Warren County was targeted. To make matters worse, Governor Jim Hunt’s administration released a statement saying, “public sentiment would not deter the state from burying the PCBs in Warren County,” despite strong opposition from the people who were living there at the time. It is in this way that the Warren County PCB Landfill Protests resemble the Civil Rights movement protests. There are glaring similarities between the catalyst of the Warren County PCB Landfill protests and the Civil Rights movement. For one, both movements were born from civil unrest that had gone unaddressed by the government. While it may seem obvious for protest to follow civil discontent, it is worth noting that the people who were affected by the issues addressed during Civil Rights movement were also affected by environmental racism some twenty years later. The same population was once again being largely ignored by all levels of the United States government. Next, the tactics utilized by the activists in the Warren County Protests closely resembled that of the Civil Rights movement. For example, the environmental activists marched with signs that conveyed a political message

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<sup>3</sup> Luke W. Cole, *From the Ground up: Environmental Racism and the Rise of the Environmental Justice Movement*, Critical America (New York: University Press, 2001).

<sup>4</sup> “Toxic Wastes and Race In the United States: A National Report on the Racial and Socio-Economic Characteristics of Communities with Hazardous Waste Sites.,” n.d., 10.

in the same way that Civil Rights activists marched with signs during freedom marches. Lastly, the Civil Rights period acted as a time of the reevaluation of race relations in the United States, during which a lot of academic information was released regarding the government's role in upholding racism. Environmentalists following the Warren County protests were then able to utilize the academic research that factified their experiences as minorities in America, giving credibility through an academic voice to the protestors.

### **Linking Race and Environment**

The ability to link environment to race came as a direct contribution from the Civil Rights movement. Robert Bullard detailed the connection between environment-related health issues and race in his book *Dumping in Dixie: Race, Class, and Environment Quality*. Bullard found that low-income communities with large populations of people of color were disproportionately affected by environmental toxins due to the placement of hazardous waste sites, landfills, and dumps near residential areas. Bullard chose to center his research on southern states because of the large black population that was present in that region of the United States, and southern Blacks were affected by both environmental racism and civil rights issues. His findings that black people are disproportionately closer to hazardous waste sites, landfills, and dumps, was supported by the idea that black communities and white communities have a different amount of power and decision making that makes it difficult to decrease the disparities that exist between low-income neighborhoods and middle-class or upper-class neighborhoods<sup>5</sup>, but also between white neighborhoods and minority neighborhoods.<sup>6</sup> These disparities come as a direct result of America's treatment of its black citizens after the Civil Rights era, a time during

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<sup>5</sup> Frederick H. Buttel and William L. Flinn, "Social Class and Mass Environmental Beliefs: A Reconsideration," *Environment and Behavior* 10, no. 3 (September 1, 1978): 433–50, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0013916578103008>.

<sup>6</sup> Robert D Bullard, "Race and Environmental Justice in the United States" 18 (1993): 19.

which said treatment was addressed by both the people and the government. If not for the Civil Rights era, Goldfield argues in conjunction with Bullard's findings, the link between race and environment would have been difficult to bring to light due to the systemic oppression of black people in academia and the government's general inability to acknowledge its wrongdoings against minority populations within the United States. Goldfield theorizes "as race relations continue to improve, so will Southern ecology."<sup>7</sup> This theory states that race and ecology are directly parallel and that the better that white local and state officials feel about Blackness, the better Black people can expect to be treated.<sup>8</sup> draws a direct parallel between the central topics of the Civil Rights Movement and the environmental justice movement, race and environment, and does a sufficient job in establishing the link between the two movements since race is such a large part in how and when issues are addressed in the United States. This theory also does a fine job of highlighting the power imbalance between low-income black and brown citizens and their white elected officials, whose personal preferences dictate the health and wellness of the people.

There is skepticism surrounding the idea that the government would intentionally place toxic plants in neighborhoods with large minority populations. It can be seen inversely that the price of housing would go down due to the harmful toxins that may surround a neighborhood, lowering the housing value and thus making it more affordable for low-income families to live there. However, at the time of the environmental justice movement, entire housing communities were already built and lived-in before the placement of the waste dumps. Vicki Been uses the term LULUs to describe the "Locally Undesirable Land Uses" of minority lands that many United States local governments are guilty of committing against ethnic minority populations. It

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<sup>7</sup> "Dumping in Dixie: Race, Class, and Environmental Quality," accessed August 19, 2019, <http://www.ciesin.org/docs/010-278/010-278chpt2.html>.

<sup>8</sup> D.R. Goldfield, *Promised Land: The South since 1945*, The American History Series (Harlan Davidson, Incorporated, 1987), <https://books.google.com/books?id=sx4SAAAAAYAAJ>.

is crucial to note that the communities were in place before the hazardous waste dumps were, because the issue of local and state governments denying their citizens agency and clean air despite them being their first is a particular injustice against ethnic minorities in America. The presence of health-related threats functions economically by pushing those who can afford to move out of the contaminated neighborhoods and replacing them with people who are able to afford the devalued housing, more likely to be ethnic minorities than not.<sup>9</sup> A lack of financial stability weakens community efforts, as people do not have the time to mobilize against environmental racism if they are too busy working to fight the injustices they are faced with. Robert Bullard's findings about how ethnic minorities are more likely to suffer from environment-related health issues connects strongly with Dr. Been's argument. The environmental justice movement disproportionately affects communities of color because of structural inequality that has managed to exist past the Civil Rights Movement and has manifested itself in the literal poisoning of communities of color.<sup>10</sup>

### **Seasoned Activists**

The contributions of seasoned activists between the Civil Rights Movement and the environmental justice movement of the 1980s is one of the main legacies that the Civil Rights movement left in the environmental justice movement. Seasoned activists who had participated in the Civil Rights movement and had come back again to contribute to the environmental justice movement had a wealth of knowledge that ultimately furthered the mobility of the environmental justice movement. Because they had already interacted with police and government in the 1960s,

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<sup>9</sup> Vicki Been, "Locally Undesirable Land Uses in Minority Neighborhoods: Disproportionate Siting or Market Dynamics?," 1994, <https://doi.org/10.2307/797089>.

<sup>10</sup> Bullard, "Race and Environmental Justice in the United States."

two-time activists were equipped to let others know what worked the first time and what would be likely or unlikely to work again for their specific cause. In addition, many activists had forged relationships with their local governments as active voices in policy reform, and these contributions were important to the credibility of the environmental justice activists. For example, Benjamin F. Chavis, a key contributor to the environmental justice movement and "the father of the post-modern environmental justice movement," was able to participate so deeply in the environmental justice movement because of his direct involvement with the Civil Rights movement. Chavis had been Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s Youth Commissioner of North Carolina when he was in university, where he learned what it takes to centralize a body of people around a specific issue and how to get them to act on their concerns at a political level. As Field Commissioner of the United Church of Christ, Chavis worked alongside academic scholars to release his study called *Toxic Waste and Race in the United States of America* under the United Church of Christ, which supported Bullard's earlier findings that city planning and unequal distribution of toxic waste sites to communities of color was no coincidence. These academic texts provided a basis of understanding that activists could use to communicate with their local lawmakers by providing indisputable evidence that poor environments disproportionately affect people of color in the United States. This allowed for organizing groups to focus on many subsections at one time, and further allowed for different organizations to focus on different facets of the general problem of environmental injustice.<sup>11</sup> By bringing light to more specific issues of environmental inequality such as geographical inequity, distributional inequity, and environmental social inequity, academics stirred interconnected conversations about all the effects that environmental inequality could have on a community.

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<sup>11</sup> David Monsma, "Equal Rights, Governance, and the Environmental Justice Principles in Corporate Social Responsibility" 33 (n.d.): 57.



## Grassroots Networks

The Civil Rights movement passed direct information from its movement onto the environmental justice movement of the 1980s through conventional and non-conventional methods. Thanks to the Civil Rights movement, environmental justice activists had direct knowledge about how their demands may have been met by local and state governments. A large portion of environmental policy was influenced directly by race relations within the United States, as environmental protection laws were laxer in low-income, minority populations of the United States.<sup>12</sup> In order to combat this inequality, environmentalists adopted a similar strategy to that which was used in the Civil Rights era, which was to elect only the officials who had their concerns at the forefront into office.

The United Church of Christ is a church network that has over four-thousand locations across the United States. As a predominantly black place of worship, The United Church of Christ became politically activated during the Civil Rights movement and carried its network into the environmental justice movement. The environmental justice movement adopted this legacy of the Civil Rights movement through the involvement of Civil Rights activists, but they were able to utilize it for their own purpose as well. The United Church of Christ provided a grassroots network that allowed for neighboring cities and counties to communicate with each other, organize protest plans, and also to mobilize across city lines. Their reach as a community organization put the United Church of Christ in contact with many organizations ranging from commercial to academic, and the church was able to become a hub of information and programming during the environmental justice movement of the 1980s. They released *Toxic Waste and Race: A National Report on the Racial and Socio-Economic Characteristics of*

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<sup>12</sup> Monsma.

*Communities with Hazardous Waste Sites*. Their research goes hand in hand with that of Chavis and Bullard in how they too discovered a link between minority population, income level, and environmental toxin presence. The three are also in agreement that race is the greatest determining factor for whether or not one is more likely to be living near to a waste plant or an otherwise uncontrolled toxic waste plant.<sup>13</sup> The United Church of Christ took their research a step further and directly urged government action from local, state, and federal governments, directly addressing the President of the United States and urging that an Office of Hazardous Wastes and Racial and Ethnic Affairs be built.

The extensive network coming straight out of the Civil Rights movement was also helpful in how the activists navigated their interactions with advocacy, academia, and government.

Advocacy was easier because of the established intrapersonal relationships coming from the Civil Rights movement.<sup>14</sup> People had already struggled together once before, which allowed for deeper trust in leadership. Not only were people more confident in the relationships they had established during the Civil Rights era, they were also more confident in their abilities to organize and mobilize. In an interview with the Los Angeles Times in 1981, one activist expressed that she felt that her efforts were for something after seeing how the Civil Rights movement impacted policy change. In addition to advocacy, academia had taken off as a credible field and

### **Mobilization Tactics**

Nonviolent direct action was proven to be critical in enacting policy change during the Civil Rights movement, as it disrupted the status quo and made it hard for people to ignore that there

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<sup>13</sup> "Toxic Wastes and Race In the United States: A National Report on the Racial and Socio-Economic Characteristics of Communities with Hazardous Waste Sites."

<sup>14</sup> Nicholas Freudenberg and Carol Steinsapir, "Not in Our Backyards: The Grassroots Environmental Movement," *Society & Natural Resources* 4, no. 3 (July 1, 1991): 235–45, <https://doi.org/10.1080/08941929109380757>.

were large issues that required immediate addressing. Some examples of direct-action protests from the Civil Rights movement were the peaceful sit-ins and freedom marches. During sit-ins, African Americans would sit-in at segregated establishments and refuse to leave even after being denied service. Freedom marches were when large groups of protestors would march down the streets with signs as a means to convey a political message in a large group. The environmental justice movement drew inspiration directly from the Civil Rights movement in their use of these tactics.<sup>15</sup> Cole compared the use of the body as a political vehicle as something that was present between the two movements. For example, during sit-ins of the civil Rights movement, African Americans politicized their bodies by putting themselves in the direct line of danger when trying to make a political statement. This meant that even when physical force was used to make them move, these protestors would put up active resistance. The same can be said for the environmental justice movement.<sup>16</sup> When construction companies would be on their way to build a new landfill or hazardous dump site, protestors would directly lay their bodies in the way of the vehicles so that they could not pass. This meant that the constructors could either not access the site that they wished to build the toxic plants on, or construction would be stalled for a significant amount of time, inconveniencing the politicians and city planners who commissioned the building of said toxic sites. This would cost cities significantly amounts of money and made the issue of environmental racism virtually impossible for the cities to ignore. Environmentalists also mobilized outside of just protesting, speaking to their local politicians through lobbying and speaking to their fellow community members through canvassing. By lobbying, which is to directly contact the local government and promote legislation that one would like to see get

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<sup>15</sup> "Civil Rights Movement Tactics," Civil Rights Teaching, accessed August 19, 2019, <https://www.civilrightsteaching.org/voting-rights/documents-based-lesson/civil-rights-movement-tactics>.

<sup>16</sup> David S. Meyer and Nancy Whittier, "Social Movement Spillover," *Social Problems* 41, no. 2 (1994): 277–98, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3096934>.

passed, environmental activists would humanize the issue and also be sure that their politicians knew what was going on in the community. This way they were able to hold local offices accountable and let it be known to the rest of the community whether or not proposed legislation was under review or if it was being brushed under the rug.<sup>17</sup> By canvassing door-to-door, activists could directly recruit new members and expand the problem as a concern for the entire community, not just the people who found themselves affected.

## **Discussion**

The Civil Rights movement had a direct influence on the environmental justice movement of the 1980s. The four main legacies that it contributed: the ability to recognize environment and race as directly related, the contributions of seasoned activists from the Civil Rights movement to the environmental justice movement, the grassroots networks that were established during the Civil Rights movement and returned for the environmental justice movement, and the mobilization tactics employed during the Civil Rights movement that environmental activists modeled their own protests after, had a significant influence on how local activists executed their political agendas. This research is important because the fight against environmental racism is not over, as toxins and contaminated water are still issues that low-income and minority cities. Low-income and minority populations within the United States continue to be disproportionately affected by environment-related health issues. With the catastrophic predictions surrounding an increase in global climate coming to the heightened attention of the public, it is more important now than ever to consider the ways in which mobilization can enact change against discriminatory environmental policies. This project can be

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<sup>17</sup> "ENVIRONMENTALISM IN THE 80'S - The New York Times," accessed August 19, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/1981/05/31/nyregion/environmentalism-in-the-80-s.html>.

expanded to the global scale to analyze the role that a history of colonialism plays in what scholars often refer to as the “underdeveloped Global South.”

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